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Dance, Ecology, and the Deep World

An interview with Arawana Hayashi and Jennifer Monson at SEEDS

by Margit Galanter

Last summer, Arawana Hayashi and Jennifer Monson each taught a weekend intensive during SEEDS (Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance, + Science), an interdisciplinary arts and ecology festival at Earthdance in Plainfield, Massachusetts. Afterward, we had a conversation about Arawana's path into improvisational dance and bugaku *(a traditional Japanese dance form), about lineage generally, and about the contexts of Jennifer's research into wilderness and migration.*

Arawana mentioned in class that in bugaku *one communicates with the ancestors who inhabit the underground through stomping on the ground. This potent image points to the resonance of dance, literally and figuratively. It contributes to a sense that embodied action—engaged and attentive—cultivates an understanding of relatedness, and that consciousness of lineage enriches this sense of connection as well.*

Arawana and Jennifer each offer unique considerations of the regenerative possibilities of movement through their relations with nature and memory, which nourish the artistic process and in turn feed the contexts from which their dances arise.

[MG]

Jennifer Monson at the Ridgewood Reservoir, Highland Park, in NYC, researching for the iMAP/Ridgewood Reservoir Project, May 2007.

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Arawana Hayashi teaching The Art of Making a True Move, her workshop at the SEEDS festival at Earthdance, Plainfield, Massachusetts, August 2008.

MG: I am interested in embodiment and how you understand that it connects to lineage, and about your lineage, your dance history.

AH: It seems that lineages in general have been important, and teachers within them, in the sense of being in a line, a line of people who are working in a certain way—this feels very rich to me. Dance-wise, there are probably a lot of people who have "all over the map training" similar to my own. I started when I was about five in Cleveland, Ohio, in the ballet, until I was about sixteen. We lived in the country. My mom used to drive me down to the city once or twice a week. I was a slightly overweight little Japanese girl with glasses studying ballet—not much of a chance that I was ever going to be a ballet dancer!

Later, in Boston, I was part of Dance Circle, a little community of dancers, and I also attended American Dance Festival, where I met Jamie Cunningham, an improviser who I worked with in New York City. I still adore him.

In 1968, the year Dr. King was murdered, the city of Boston put together a summer urban arts program. Probably because I was neither black nor white, I got hired as a choreographer with a group of twenty-somethings to teach and put together performance groups. We went into the African American, Italian American, Irish American neighborhoods—we didn't stay for a pizza, mind you. We performed and left.

As a result of this work, the City of Boston set up a dance company for me, City as Theater. It was a great time to be in the city with arts. Many of the things that I taught at SEEDS, like The Village, actually came from the time when I was teaching improvisation at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It was my inquiry into how to pay attention and what to attend to in ensemble improvisation.

In 1976 I moved to Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, to work with Barbara Dilley as co-director of the dance department. When I got there I started studying *bugaku*, Japanese court dance. I got very interested in how the dances of a particular culture or ethnicity were held in the minds of those people, and how we could broaden and deepen our own worldview through the dances and music of different cultures on the planet.

Trungpa Rinpoche loved Japanese and other traditional cultures. He was really interested in studying flower arranging, tea ceremonies, and other art forms that would be practices of regal, ego-less expressions of art. Tibet is very different because it doesn't have any art separated from religious practice, whereas Japan has a relationship between religious culture, court culture, and warrior culture.

MG: Suprapto Suryodarmo was here last week. He talked about how the forms in Indonesia don't have the same possibility to *cook* the way they do in the States because of the freedom here in the West. We create hybrids, and there is a shifting over time that arises here in a way that it doesn't in traditional cultures. Naropa University is a unique example of creativity and tradition in union.

AH: Yes, particularly in the beginning, because we had all these people continually coming and working together—dancers, poets like Allen Ginsberg, and musicians. It was an incredibly wonderful and fertile time. That is the lineage of what is happening there still today.

At Naropa, it was a continuing inquiry for me of how much the state of mind affected the expression. The Naropa training was meditation-based—how you could train the mind as well as the body in a particular way. When I first saw Trungpa Rinpoche, I had never seen a person move his body in that way. This is a person with no ambient movement. This is a person who is *there*. There was some quality of that embodiment that I had never seen before. Wow. How does one live in his body with that kind of presence?

What does it mean to bring art-making into a meditative inquiry? Naropa was a community of people who were interested in this question, who really appreciated the opportunity for those two practices to live together.

MG: In the first exercise, The 20-Minute Dance, you have us notice when we are thinking, and to return back to the body, which is reminiscent of *shamatha,* a meditation practice in which you return back to the breath. Did being in the context of the Shambhala tradition of Buddhism at Naropa give form to some previous artistic questions for you?

AH: Probably. It's hard to say what influenced what, but that is a *shamatha* instruction, a mindfulness instruction. I came to meditation, to sitting, from movement. Already in the early '70s I was practicing yoga and tai chi chuan.

video stills © Sandra Yee

Arawana Hayashi teaching at the SEEDS festival at Earthdance, Plainfield, Massachusetts, August 2008.

I came to it from that direction, and I think other people do, too; the moving leads them to wondering what it is like to just sit still.

MG: Arawana, you said something briefly yesterday, and Jennifer, I would love to hear your response as well. You were making this distinction between the movement and the dance. How do you experience this?

AH: I think I am referring to the dance as what is appearing. So whatever one contributes in terms of movement or stillness or the collective body is *moving*. What you make—or, if it's duet form, what is being made—is the *dance*, but it's not the same as what you are doing. You are contributing something by your own presence, by your own choice of gesture, but the dance itself is something else; the light, those sort of energetic, invisible qualities are also a part of the dance.

JM: That's a beautiful distinction. When you first asked the question, I was thinking that the dance has something to do with a witness.

In my teaching I often ask people to dance something back to someone else, so there is an exchange happening that creates what Arawana is talking about, something larger than the movement. I think of movement as having a particular function, whereas I see dance as having a more poetic function—it proposes the relationship of movement beyond its context. "Movement" is something that we use in so many contexts, but "dance" has a narrower context in which it is understood culturally.

AH: The word "dance" can be used metaphorically, suggesting a bigger sense of relationship and interdependency—like using the word "theater" to describe a place in which something happens: the theater of war or the operating theater. "Dance" is used like that too. It can be a much larger sense of how life moves and pauses and moves and pauses.

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MG: How do you each define the locus of your work? Is it in relationship to the movement itself? To larger projects and concepts? Are you developing particular movement forms?

JM: It's funny, listening to Arawana and thinking about how teaching informs me, I feel there are forms that I am developing that are primarily about awareness. This process was deeply influenced by my study of animal navigation in the *BIRD BRAIN* project. The fact that a bird can navigate the length of the North American continent by listening to the Atlantic waves crashing, the wind blowing through the Rockies, and volcanic rumblings in Costa Rica blows my mind: I wanna be able to do that! *[laughter]*

So I started trying to figure how I could develop my own perceptual capacity and investigate how that influenced my choreographic process. Navigation makes so much sense as improvisers—we are navigating with our senses, yet it's on a smaller scale than birds. It took me into studying movement, systems, and phenomena. I'm not sure that I am making dances. I'm studying something else—dance methodologies as a way of knowing the world, in dialogue with other fields. To answer your question, I am slowly developing forms that I use over and over again. As a teacher you have to get some kind of pedagogy in place. I remember that for years I tried to teach something new every time, and that just gets really exhausting. These forms are a way of bringing awareness and inquiry to the role of dance and art in relation to dynamic shifts taking place in our understanding of environmental issues.

AH: *Bugaku* came into Japan in the sixth or seventh century. It's imported. Basically it didn't change that much because Japan's borders were closed soon thereafter. My teacher's family has been there since the Nara period. For me—improvising, making work, and *bugaku*—there didn't seem to be any difference. I only know eight dances, which I have been doing for thirty years—the same gesture every single time—and yet it doesn't seem any different to me than improvising.

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MG: Here at SEEDS, a line of research, though so obvious for movers, is challenging to describe—how movement attunes us to our environment, opening a potential for stewardship. Can you describe how both the experience of working with traditional and novel forms offers you ways to be of benefit to the environment? It would be useful to hear how you each speak of this.

AH: It's easy in looking at the traditional form. *Bugaku* is now associated

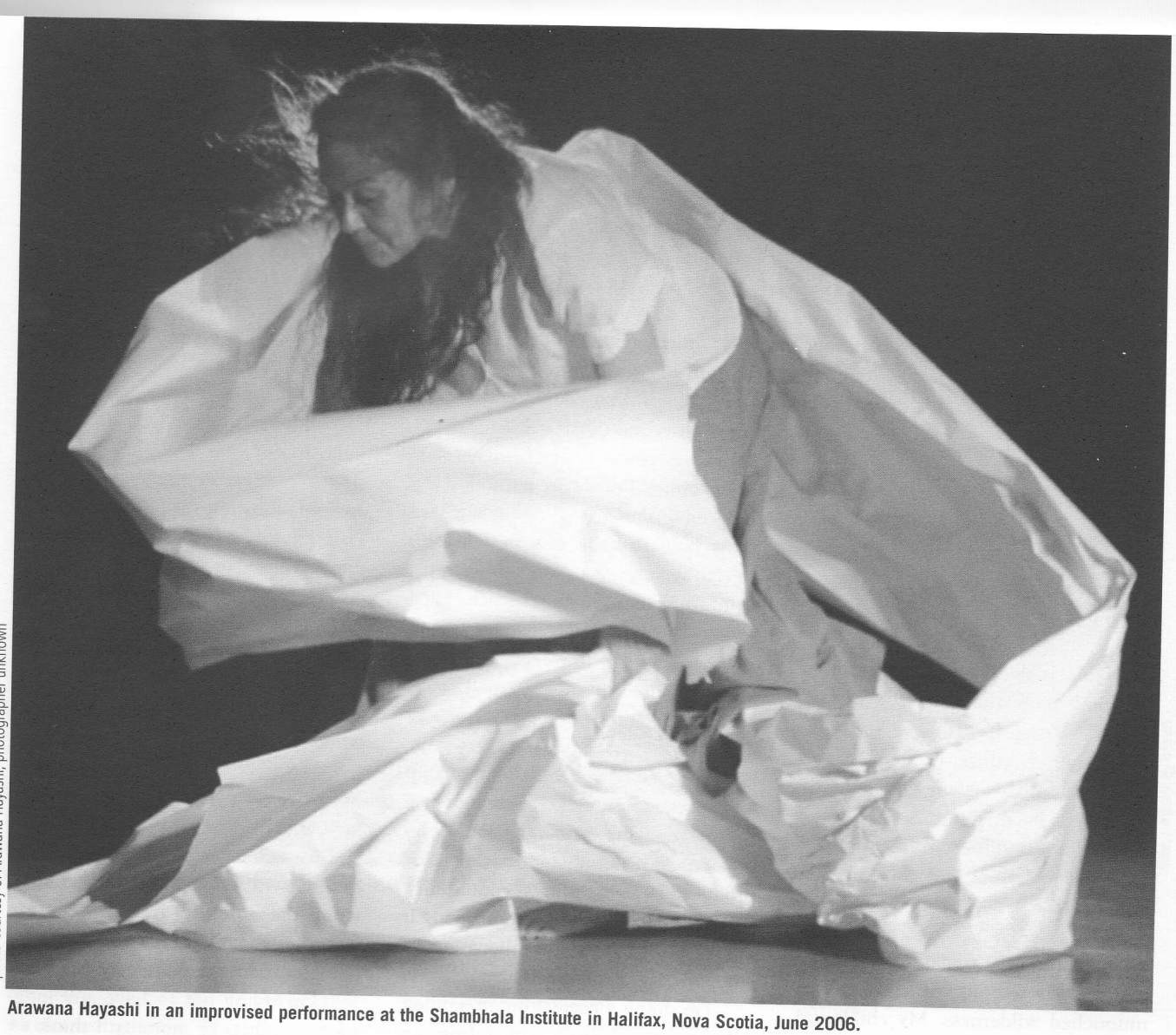

photo courtesy of Arawana Hayashi, photographer unknown

Arawana Hayashi in an improvised performance at the Shambhala Institute in Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 2006.

with Shinto. It was made specifically to bring more gods and harmony into the world. And it was made specifically as a geomancy, how you balance the world. My teacher insisted: "This is what the movement is." If you do the movement correctly and you do the music correctly, then *this* happens. It wasn't about what it meant. He wasn't interested in what it meant. He was transmitting as he had been taught; for generations and generations people learned it this way. *Bugaku* was traditionally performed by men and passed down in the family, generally from father to son. In a traditional art form, we try to imitate our teacher—the subtlety and nuance. But this was in my teacher's bones for generations, since the eighth century. To imitate how he does it is really the only thing that I ever tried to do. I perform it outside of its environmental setup—outside of the imperial court, outside of Japan—at conventions, martial arts demonstrations, schools, Asian unity dinners, and museums. Nonetheless, I danced to bring some kind of harmonious and peaceful energy into the environment.

I also feel that it comes through now when I improvise, even though it's not the same form. We have a shrine in Colorado, and there is a yearly festival where we clean the shrine and a Shinto priest comes to do a ceremony, including a dance. They have a series of shrine dances that are usually done by young women, but they're separate from the repertory that I know. Every year I make something up, but it feels completely fine. You know, there is this goddess there, and it's beautiful out in the shrine, and I make something up and so far she seems to be happy with it.

JM: How do you gauge her happiness?

AH: Oh, I don't know…

JM: I was in Japan in August, during the Obun Festival, when they carried the shrines around.

AH: For the dead?

JM: Yeah. They carry the shrines and the men go "*wah shoh wah shoh wah shoh,*" and they are trying to make the gods happy so they will be good to the dead.

AH: Gary Snyder wrote a piece about "the deep world" and ritual and dances in the *Shambhala Sun* around a year ago. It's about his growing up and how he got involved in ecology. It ends with this amazing thing that he calls the

deep world, and how human beings are sometimes dead to the deep world.... What does the deep world want from us? And so he says the deep world likes our dancing, our music, and the deep world thinks we have cute ears. What the deep world wants in return as a debt is that they want all the rituals and the music and our dancing and our stories. It's quite inspiring.

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MG: Jennifer, it sounds like your work was inspired by wanting to emulate the animals to some extent.

JM: Yeah, part of it is an attempt to negotiate my relationship with what is natural. Dance has always been the place where I connect to my nature or my wildness. This whole decade of my work has been about renegotiating that and questioning all of it.

MG: Why?

JM: I had a very romantic notion of nature. I started out with this idea of untouched wilderness. My childhood fantasy was to be the only human on the earth with all the animals. This was deeply anti-human, where I had nature to myself. I grew up in the high desert in this beautiful, completely unique site that's very fragile. My mother trained me never to step on a plant and to hate off-road vehicles. Once they go over the earth, it takes years to reconstruct the topsoil because of its delicacy.

I think American culture idealizes wilderness. I just read a William Cronin essay on it, so it's fresh in my mind. The early American transcendentalists imagined that there was a wilderness out there that was a place for democracy and self-realization. All these fantasies of what it meant to be truly American were based on this concept of uninhabited wilderness, which is not what our country was. Our country was inhabited. The fantasy is that wilderness is a place where we become pure. But we are natural in the built environment. That's where we know how to cook and pee and do everything else that we do. I read a beautiful book by Jennifer Price called *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. Now every time I get in a car I think that the gas that's running it is dinosaurs decomposed millions of years ago. That gives me a different feeling about the relationship to the resources I use. I sense or feel this relationship, what the long-term impact will be on my biotic [caused or produced by living things] community. It makes me feel more connected. It allows me to resist the alienation of consumerist, disposable culture.

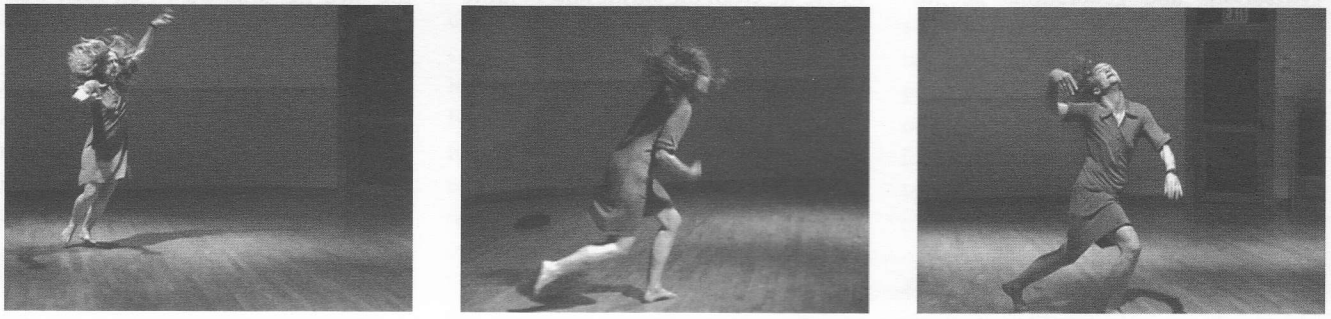
I'm doing a project on an aquifer. All the water I drink comes from an aquifer. Pretty soon all the water that is in my body will be from that aquifer. Am I the aquifer? When does the aquifer become me?

I am trying to renegotiate that through my body. My own experience of emulating these animals and the metaphor of migration is so powerful. All those little tiny birds flying in massive flocks connecting different ecological systems and communities—every time they stop they're doing something essential to that ecosystem. And we don't completely understand how this exchange balances communities connected across hemispheres. There are so many patterns in the earth. Weather patterns come to the equator and move back, but these migratory birds cross it and connect north and south. Just by bringing their songs to our ears they make us aware of where we are in time and space and our relationship to everything else. That kind of sensitivity comes to me through my dancing and my research into these phenomena.

MG: You're also talking about communing with nature. You emulate, and the interaction can effect change in the whole system.

JM: I feel like I am coming back to that now, but first that seemed too personal, and I was focusing on science, collaboration with scientists, understanding what the satellite transmitters are learning about where the birds are going, building these relationships.

I'm trying not to have any judgment or ethics or morality. I think we should make choices that are based on our awareness and working with systems. I think this guilt of "Oh, we fucked things up" makes it really hard to move forward. We are moving forward. What's the most positive way that I can move forward? Building that rammed earth gate for the Earthdance entrance, having a SEEDS festival, cultivating these awarenesses by working to get my diesel car or grease car,



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Jennifer Monson performing at the SEEDS festival at Earthdance, Plainfield, Massachusetts, August 2008.

photo © Kenta Nagai

Jennifer Monson collecting phragmites for *Flight of Mind* (2005), East River, Brooklyn, NY, August 2005.

or not using a lot of water—not because I feel like I should but because it's interesting to me. Then, does it take me more time to do the dishes? Do I slow down a little bit? It affects my dancing. It affects my everything.

MG: Arawana, what you said today in class was really inspiring: When you blame someone else, you become the victim. You can no longer engage because you disengage. That it's disembodying to say, "George Bush did it." What is my part? This speaks to engagement. It's that key to finding your own embodiment.

AH: Which is different from placing guilt. I am part of a collective creation. This is the product, this mess we are in. This has enormous agency. I can, with friends who are also creating this system, make some changes, and that is a different thing than "I should recycle." Likewise, it's not the same as "I didn't make this mess." It came generations before. But we're saying that we actually contribute to this. And that brings enormous power once you engage with that.

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Margit Galanter edited this article from a much longer transcript she made of the original interview. To see the unedited transcript, go to www.margitg.wordpress.com.

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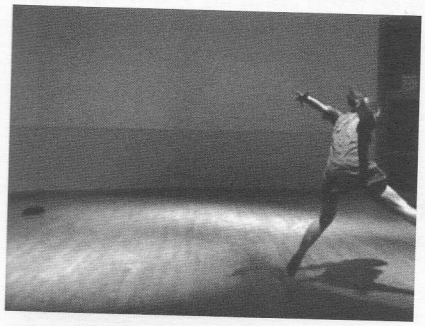

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